

Community Assistantship Program

Out of Home Placement Study

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Out of Home Placement Study

Conducted in partnership with
Freeborn County Department of Human Services

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Introduction

This project was designed to address issues regarding evaluation of services provided by Freeborn County Human Services. The project was funded by The Community Assistantship Program at the University of Minnesota. A graduate student from the College of Human Ecology was selected to conduct the study, along with Wendy Walker, Children's Mental Health Supervisor at Freeborn County Human Services. The grant was provided for three months, the summer of 2001.

Representatives from Freeborn County Human Services stated that this project came about as a result of increased costs in the area of out of home placement.

The following objectives were listed in the grant application:

- ◆ To assess the consumers' perception of the effectiveness of their residential treatment experiences on overall life satisfaction. How long was the placement? How many placements were they in as a child or adolescent?
- ◆ To ask the consumers' what factors were missing from their treatment experience? Did they receive family counseling? Did the family participate and if so in what way and how often?
- ◆ To determine what their current status is in the relation to life adjustment. Are they currently working? How long have they worked at this position? Have they been involved with the legal system as an adult?

Methodology

It was decided that due to the probable small sample size and the length of time that the grant was provided, interviews would be the most effective means of reaching the above stated objectives. The researchers anticipated that the sample would be small, as only 48 potential candidates were identified, and it would be a difficult population to locate. In addition, it was anticipated that several people when located would turn down the opportunity to participate. In such a short amount of time, it was impossible to design a study that could compare before and after variables in a controlled fashion. Given these limitations, a phenomenological approach would best give the greatest amount of data.

The first step in this project was to identify potential participants. The research assistant pulled social service files, using a randomized system, from the records room at Freeborn County Human Services. These records consisted of both open and closed cases. If any of the files consisted of an incidence of out of home placement, identifying information was written down. Halfway through the process, the researchers met to determine what types of families would be worth pursuing as potential subjects. After a list of 95 potential participants was compiled, the researchers went through the list and identified 48 possible candidates. 47 names were excluded for the following reasons. Nine had been in placement for too short of time, under one month. Five had parental rights terminated, and then placed for adoption. Nineteen had been placed through corrections only. In these cases Human Services had an open file because they paid for the services, but they were not in control of whether or not a child was placed. Nine were placed previous to 1990. It was decided that many policies and procedures have changed in the past decade, and therefore information provided by these people may be dated or irrelevant. Two had been ten years old or younger when reunified with their family after being placed. These people may not have a strong recollection of their experiences. And three were developmentally delayed.

The next step was to locate the people identified. If a current address was not available, the last known address was used. Each person received a letter inviting them to participate in the study, along with an explanation of the purpose of the study and a contact person.

Also during that time, the research assistant conducted an extensive literature review to determine past research results in this area. This review was used to compile a list of questions for the interviews. It also familiarized the research assistant to the particular issues faced by this population. The researcher also met with a former foster child and reviewed the list of potential questions, in regards to their relevancy and wording. The following list of questions was produced.

1. Who was helpful in teaching you to live on your own?
2. Where do you live now?
3. Are you employed? How long have you been there?

4. What was your last completed grade?
5. Do you want to go to college or tech school?
6. Do you know have to open a savings account?
7. What other challenges have you faced since turning 18?
8. Overall, what was most helpful at (type of placement)?
9. What was least helpful?
10. Did you feel safe there?
11. Did you have one or more caring adults who were consistent in your life?
12. Did living away from home change the way you thought about yourself?
13. Did your family participate in any family counseling?
14. Did you wish you received other types of help? What type?
15. Were your caseworkers helpful?
16. Can you share with me any other feelings about your life experiences?
17. How do you think your life would be different if you had not been placed out of the home?
18. What advice would you like to give Human Services?

No persons responded to the letters sent. Also, several letters were returned and no forwarding address was found. It was decided that \$20 would also be provided for the participants as an incentive for participation. The research assistant attempted to contact people through phone calls to ask for their voluntary participation. In the end seven individuals agreed to participate. However one did not show for his appointment, and attempts to reach him were unsuccessful. Also, when attempting to find one former child, a parent asked if she could make a statement about out of home placement over the phone. Her statements are included in the results section.

The remaining 40 candidates did not participate for the following reasons. Two stated that they were only in placement a short amount of time and did not think they had anything of value to contribute. The researchers were unable to locate 27 people. Seven stated that they were not interested in participating. Two were in prison. One moved out of state. Three were found, however they were never reached through telephone contact. One, upon further evaluation, was discovered to have been too young when reunified with family. Two were developmentally delayed. Two were in juvenile detention centers.

Five out of the six participants were interviewed in their homes. The sixth was interviewed at the Freeborn County Human Services building. Each interview was tape recorded and later transcribed by the research assistant. Unfortunately, one tape did not record the entire interview, and therefore some of the data was lost. The interviews were semi-structured. The above questions were asked, but additional questions were asked to obtain a more full picture of the participants' lives during out of home placement and during the present. Transcriptions were coded and analyzed by the research assistant.

Sample Characteristics

Six individuals participated in this study. Their demographic information is listed below.

Gender

Female: 4

Male: 2

Age at time of first placement

11: 1

13: 1

14: 2

16: 2

Current age

14: 1

17: 2

20: 2

26: 1

Initial reason for placement

Abuse or neglect by parents: 3

Child's behavior: 3

Number of placements

Two: 1

Three: 2

Five: 1

Eight: 1

Nine: 1

Race

Caucasian: 5

Hispanic: 1

Types of placements (note that many were placed in several types of places, therefore the numbers total over six)

Foster care: 4

Group home: 4

Emergency shelter: 5

Chemical dependency treatment: 2

Therapeutic foster home: 2

Juvenile detention center: 2

Kinship foster care: 2

There was an attempt made to locate 48 individuals to participate. Six were both located and agreed to participate. This is 12.5% of the intended population. Although six seems like a small number, it is not unusual to only obtain 10% of a given population when it is a difficult population to locate. The size of the sample does limit what inferences could be made. Statistical tests are not possible. It is not possible to explore how issues of race, gender, and reason for placement impact the participants' viewpoint. However, these six people can provide valuable information on an individual level.

This small sample was a heterogeneous group. They have been in several types of placements, and therefore can comment on a variety of different places and experiences. They were in placements for a variety of reasons. Half were initially placed for abuse or neglect by parents, and half were initially placed because of their own behaviors. However, two of the participants who were placed because of their parents' behaviors, were subsequently moved around and placed in places other than foster care because of their own behaviors in foster care. Also, when looking at the case files on the participants who were placed because of their own behavior, it was noted that two also had child protection reports in their files. Thus, indicating violence in their homes at one time.

Due to the difficulty in locating participants, this group is younger than the original intent. The younger people were easier to locate, as they had not moved far away. Because of the age of the participants, some questions had to be modified to fit their age group.

Results

What are they doing now?

♦ Living arrangements

- Two of the adolescents are living in foster care, and plan to remain there until they turn 18. One of the two is in kinship care.
- The remaining adolescent is living with a biological parent
- One twenty year old is living with a relative, and has never lived on his own. He plans to get his first apartment in the near future.
- The other twenty-year-old owns her own house, and resides with her boyfriend.
- The twenty six-year-old lives in an apartment with her boyfriend and two children.

♦ Employment

- One adult is employed full-time, and has been for several years
- One adult is employed part-time, and in school full-time
- One adult is employed part-time; he had been at his job for one and a half months. He stated that he often does not stay at jobs long.
- One adolescent works at a local fast food restaurant, and had been there for over one year.
- One adolescent works at two part-time jobs. She has held jobs for one to two years.
- One adolescent works at a camp during the summer. This is his first summer there.

♦ Education

- Three are currently enrolled in high school.
- One has a GED.
- One does not have a degree.
- One has a high school degree, and is currently enrolled in community college courses.

♦ Savings account

- Four participants have savings accounts.
- One participant does not have a savings account.
- There is missing data on one participant.

♦ Future plans

- One adolescent has plans to attend local community college and then transfer to a four-year college. She hopes to major in physical therapy.
- One adolescent hopes to go to college on an athletic scholarship. He would like to be a counselor for people with disabilities.

- One adolescent would like to go to college. She is unsure of what her major would be, but she would like to work with children. She does not plan to go to college immediately after high school.
- One adult is currently enrolled in a two-year program in accounting, and plans to finish her degree next year.
- One adult is satisfied with her current position in law enforcement, however she may want to return to school. She is undecided about whether or not she would return for a two-year or four-year degree.
- One adult does not have any plans for the future, and stated that he "takes one day at a time".

Where and how did they learn independent living skills?

- One participant had a high school class that addressed independent living skills.
- Four participants (two adolescents and two adults) stated that they did not learn independent living skills anywhere, one of the adults stated that she learned on her own and learned from her mistakes as she went along.
- One participant stated that she learned what she needed to know either on her own, or from her parents.
- None stated that they learned any independent living skills from anyone in an out of home placement.

What types of out of home placements were most helpful, and what qualities made them helpful?

- One participant stated that the group home that she stayed in for the longest amount of time was the most helpful. When asked why, she stated *"they taught me how to deal with my problems. And instead of staff members holding you accountable for your actions, it was actually the kids that held you accountable. In my mind, that helps a hell of a lot better than adults. And I really had to learn how to deal with my issues, and get past them. And to control my anger."* This particular participant ran from many placements. She commented on whether or not she would run based upon the particular placement. *"If I got treated like a human being I would stay somewhere. But if they're gonna treat me like crap, see ya."*

- One participant stated that she felt being in kinship foster care was very helpful. When asked why she liked kinship foster care and what the benefits were she stated *"oh, it's been fun. They are very nice people";* and *"if I need something, they're always there. I don't have to go around town, like I had to with my Mom, and look for them";* and *"you have people there all the time, if you just need to talk or whatever, you know they're not going to leave without you. I think you just feel safer with having people around."* She also commented that she felt being in kinship foster care was beneficial because she wasn't with "complete strangers".

- One participant identified therapeutic foster care as the most helpful placement. When asked why she stated “*they reached out more than any other place, like it was actually one to one contact. They helped you one on one; and “they didn’t just do it to get the money and then get you out of there. If they felt you weren’t ready to go then they would tell you and you would stay there.”* She also commented “*they taught you morals and sobriety*”.

- One participant stated that he believed the most helpful placement was therapeutic foster care. He stated that “*she don’t let me get away with things*”; and “*she teaches me how to hang on to my money. Because before whenever I had money, I’d go out and spend it right away.*”

- One participant stated that the help he received did not maintain itself for longer than a few months. He believed the most helpful aspect of out of home placement was that it got him away from his peers for a short amount of time.

- One participant stated that she believed what helped her was turning eighteen, not any of the out of home placements. However, she did state that she believed that one of the correctional placements was a “better program” than other programs. The qualities that made it better in her opinion, was that it was more structured, but at the same time fun because of outdoor activities.

How did out of home placement change them?

The following statements were made in response to this question.

- “I’m not running around all the time anymore”
- “I take showers every day”
- “I don’t see fighting anymore”
- “My grades changed and I was in school more...I’d miss so much school that my grades would just go down. My grades have really been up.”
- “I feel a lot better about myself. I felt bad about myself, and now I feel a lot better about myself”.
- “I thought I was a bad ass. I guess it changed that”.
- “My grades went up”
- “I was so immature”
- “I never really got in trouble. I don’t have a criminal record; it was never like I was out breaking the law. So I guess that part of me feels like if, if I had never gotten sent away, things would have been the same anyway.”

One participant stated that he did not think he changed. One young woman stated that she was too thin before going into out of home placement. Having regular meals helped her gain weight. She stated that her friends later told her that they were afraid that she was going to die because she was so thin. Two participants stated that they no longer

used drugs. Three stated that they believed that their self-esteem improved. One stated that she was no longer suicidal.

What types of out of home placements were least helpful, and what qualities made them so?

- One participant stated that she was uncomfortable in one foster home because they didn't explain the rules to her.

- One participant stated that an emergency shelter and a group home were the least helpful. She commented *"you felt that they weren't there to help you. That they were just there to put you somewhere."* She also stated that they *"didn't do one on ones"*.

- One participant stated that a group home was the least helpful because *"the kids pretty much ran the place. And the people they had working, they could care less about what happened to us. It was just a babysitting job to them"*.

- One participant stated that a group home was the least helpful because *"all they did was restrain me"*. He also stated that some foster homes were not helpful because they used physical punishment. He reported that a juvenile detention center made his problems worse, instead of better. In regards to the juvenile detention center he stated *"it was too strict. They had specific times where you could sit down. And stand up. That's why I ran. It was so easy to run from there."* He continued later... *"all they'd do is tell you what to do. (Interviewer: did they help you with any of your problems?) No, they just made it worse"*.

- Two participants stated that out of home placements are not helpful because a person needs to make their own changes. One stated *"it was my decision, you know I had to make decisions about my life, I'd choose not to listen sometimes. You know it didn't help."* Another stated *"I don't think out of home placement, I don't think they work at all. I don't think counseling works, I really don't. I don't think that there is anything that you can do to a kid that is going to make them say, oh yeah you're right. You know, I better start going to school every day and study real hard. You know, unless the kid is really into that stuff and is never going to do anything wrong, every kid is going to go through a rebellious stage...until you grow up, or decide that you're going to change, you're not going to. It's a temporary solution that gets you away from things."* This particular person has worked in corrections, and commented upon what she observed at the facility in which she worked. *"I've seen a lot of kids that we had at... and that were really good kids. And that really wanted to change, and they do really well while they were there, and everything would be going great for them. But the minute they got home, and had to deal with the peer pressure end of it, then they'd go right back to trouble again. So it just goes back to that, eventually they're going to grow up and realize that yeah my friends are kind of stupid and they're getting me into all this trouble, and maybe*

my parents were right, or whatever. But until that point, all you worry about is your friends. You know, they're the most important."

Did they feel safe?

All stated that they felt safe in each placement, with one exception. One participant stated that he did not feel safe in each foster care placement. He also stated that he did not feel safe in a detention center. He stated that this was because he was one of the youngest kids there. He also stated that many kids beat each other up there, especially when staff was not in the room.

Where do they think they would be without out of home placement?

This question was added; it resulted from one of the interviewee's comments. Two participants did not think their lives would be different. The other four participants made the following comments.

- "I probably would not be in school right now."
- "I cannot picture how life would have been if I hadn't been in placements or changed the way I was, I don't think I'd be anywhere. I can't even picture what would have happened."
- "I would be living in the streets."
- "I would be so immature."
- "I would probably be dead. (Interviewer: why?) I was starting to get into drugs. I had very low self-esteem. There were a couple of times that I tried to commit suicide."

Did they participate in family counseling?

- Four stated that they did not participate in family counseling.
- One participated in family-based counseling.
- One stated that she participated in family week at her mother's chemical dependency treatment.

How many social workers did they have?

- Three participants stated that they don't remember.
- One participant stated that she had one social worker.
- One participant stated that she had two social workers.
- One participant stated that he had four social workers.

Did they find their social workers helpful?

One participant did not know what a social worker is. Upon review of his file, he did indeed have interactions with a social worker, and this social worker was involved in placement.

In general the comments were more negative than positive, only because the negative comments seemed to have more momentum and therefore are more in depth. Unfortunately the piece of the tape lost on one interview detailed why that participant found her social worker especially helpful. It is impossible to remember her comments exactly, but she did say that her social worker helped greatly and she believed that she was the one consistent and caring person during her adolescence.

The remaining participants responded to the question as follows.

- “One was, but then she gave us wrong information.” (this participant was not able to expand on this comment)
- “No, she never heard what I had to say; it was like we’ll just send her here. And I’d try to talk to her, and it’d be like, well this is where you are going.”
- “Switching social workers made setting up visitation between siblings difficult.”
- “She retired and nobody told me she retired. So I’m calling for this person, and they were like well, she doesn’t work here anymore.”
- “One of my social workers got fired. I didn’t really know her well. The other one was pretty nice. The third one I had was really nice; she always took me out to McDonalds and stuff.”
- “When he was alone with me it was a different story, then all of a sudden he was like my friend. And he was going to do this and do that. But then he never followed through on anything, and then as soon as anyone else entered the picture, then it was like, oh no, you’re right, she needs to get out of the house or do whatever. It just seemed like he was always, from what he told me and then the way he acted around other people, was always different. And I always felt like he was a liar.”
- (In regards to a social worker attending family-based counseling) “He put a weird, he changes the whole atmosphere, it’s not your family and the counselor, it’s your family and social worker. I didn’t trust him enough to ever have him around. That’s probably why it made me so uncomfortable, because I felt that everything that I said was somehow being turned around or going to come back later to haunt me.”
- “My group home told me that my social worker and my probation officer didn’t want me to go back and live with my Mom. And that’s where I wanted to go. I didn’t want to live here because I know how strict my Dad is.... and I felt that nobody cared how I felt. They were like, this is what’s best for you, and I’m like, how do you know what’s best for me. You don’t even know who my Dad is. I think I would have been fine living with my Mom... they thought maybe she

won't be as strict.... But I have a stronger bond with my Mom than I do with my Dad."

Did they wish for other types of help?

- One participant said that she would have liked increased visitation time with a sibling.
- One participant stated that she would have liked more money for clothing while in placement.
- The remaining four participants did not feel they needed any additional services.

What were their feelings about being in out of home placement?

The following are quotes from the participants about their feelings while in placement.

- "I was mad, I was mad at the person that turned us in, because I thought that I was never going to see my Mom again. And I was just really mad at first. But now I know it was for the best."
- "I was scared" (initially). "I was still missing my Mom, so I was kind of sad, and it's hard. I was just real shy at first. I would ask for everything, and they'd just say make yourself at home, it's ok."
- "I didn't like it. But I look at it this way; I did what I did, so I have to deal with the consequences."
- (initially) "I was mad. They took my shoes from me because they thought I was going to run away. I didn't want to be there. I was mad at my Mom because I thought my Mom put me there...I was mad at the world. I was so mean to everybody when I was in those places."
- "I didn't really care because I wanted to get out of my house. The only thing that was sad was my sister was crying really hard."
- "I was scared, but then after a couple of days went by, I felt comfortable."

Did they have caring and consistent adults in their lives?

- Three participants stated that they have had parents and/or grandparents that have been both caring and consistent in their lives.

- One participant stated that the foster parents (kinship) have been there consistently.
- One participant stated that the only caring and consistent adult in her life during her adolescence was her social worker.
- One participant stated that he did not have consistent and caring adults in his life, however that is changing and he feels a bond with his current foster parents and one teacher and coach at school.

What advice do they have for Freeborn County Human Services?

- "Keep siblings in contact with each other, because I think that's really important because they've already lost their parents, and they should at least keep in contact with each other. Because, I don't know, I think it's kind of hard when a brother and sister get split up, or brother and brother or sister and sister. It's just really hard because they don't have that brother or sister there that they always used to have there. But if they keep in contact with each other, I think that would be a lot better."
- "They need to just go in and get the facts, not just what they hear. They need to go in and actually talk to the child before they start saying oh we should send him here."
- "Get people that know what they're talking about...they always told me that they knew what I was going through, and they didn't. I hate when people say that. They don't know what I've been through...in my family life."
- "They need to speed up the process. (Interviewer: what process?) To get people into foster homes."
- "I just feel like they're, they may be focusing on the negative behaviors of children, when a lot of those behaviors that are coming out in the kids are because of the earlier stages because they have parents that are treating them like that and it's not being taken care of. I wasn't like that, my parents, I mean, we lived in a good neighborhood, they always gave me everything I ever wanted. I basically just kind of, if it was for attention, or I don't know, at the time it just seemed fun to just kind of run around and do my own thing. But 98% of the kids that are in placement, they're going to say that they had parents that hit them before. Or, they might not tell you, but it might come out later that they were sexually abused. Or like (boyfriend's) parents were addicted to drugs and didn't care what happened to them. Didn't provide him with anything. If they'd start looking at those cases first, when it's brought to their attention, and take care of it then, and get the child out of the home then into a normal environment, then the child probably wouldn't grow up and have to be removed later on for having the negative behavior. It's kind of sad."

- "Don't treat kids like they don't know what they're doing, like little kids. They know what they're doing. They know right from wrong, they do what they do to survive."
- "Teach kids to deal with their problems. Put it in their faces."

The next quote is paraphrased, as the original data was lost, and it is based on notes taken.

- The system has changed, now they accuse parents as if they are abusive when they are not. When I was growing up, the system did not recognize abuse. Abused kids don't proclaim it. They lie to protect their parents. I lied to school staff about my bruises.

When attempting to locate two potential subjects, their mother was contacted. She stated that her children had told her they were not interested in participating, but she asked if she could make a few comments. She reported feeling that when her children came out of out of home placement, the school system did not collaborate with social workers and probation officers. She stated that she would have liked stronger advocacy on the part of the social workers and probation workers in helping her children return to school. She believed that the schools did not want to help her children return successfully.

Conclusions

It is noteworthy that four out of the six participants, who found out of home placement helpful, listed the place that they stayed the longest as the most helpful. There are several possible reasons for this finding. One possible explanation is that they were less likely to run away from a placement that they found helpful, and therefore would not be removed from that placement. Another possible explanation is that when in a longer placement, they were more likely to work through more issues. Being in a more stable environment may allow them to work with the same therapist or counselor for an extended period of time. An additional explanation is that they were able to overcome their initial feelings of anger and/or fear if they were stayed somewhere longer. Many stated that they initially felt anger or fear when in placement, but that those feelings were resolved over time. When reflecting back, if they only stayed somewhere for a short period of time, they may only remember those initial feelings. With such a small sample, it is not possible to make any conclusive deductions. Nor does this mean that any long-term placement would therefore be more helpful. But when considering future research, this finding may be useful in creating new hypotheses.

The types of placements that were mentioned frequently as most helpful were group homes or foster care (both therapeutic and kinship). But certain components of treatment were necessary in order for participants to report them as helpful. The quality that seemed most important was respectful staff or foster parents. If the participant felt that they were respected and treated fairly, they were more likely to speak favorably of that particular placement. Part of being treated respectfully is being treated as though one can handle responsibility. One participant spoke highly of a particular group home because they insisted that the kids hold each other responsible for their actions, thus empowering them. Another foster child reported that his foster mother asked him to buy his own things, thus teaching him how to handle his money and become more responsible. Rather than resenting this new responsibility, he believed that it helped him become a better person.

Another theme in regards to helpful placements was being taught how to work through problems. Many participants spoke of the usefulness of being taught how to problem solve, especially in regards to anger management. They believed that places that only taught the consequences of behaviors did not have real and lasting impact. Many spoke of both staff or foster parents, in addition to outpatient therapists, as being instrumental to helping them learn anger management, increase self-esteem, and cope with problems.

Structured programs were spoken of more highly than unstructured ones. Some amount of structure, along with respect, seemed to bring about a higher opinion from these participants.

If the participants felt that a placement was there only as a place to hold them, rather than work with them, they were more likely to believe it was not helpful. They were also more likely to report running away from those facilities or homes. Many spoke of

placements where they felt nobody cared about them, and/or were disrespectful. They spoke of these places with disdain, and the phrase of one participant "it was a joke" seemed to capture the opinion of all. Group homes, emergency shelters, and detention centers were spoken of frequently. These participants seemed to distinguish a helpful group home from an unhelpful group home based upon these characteristics. One other factor that was significant in preventing running away behavior was whether or not they felt safe in that placement.

Two participants did not feel that out of home placement helped them, and referred to other people they knew who also did not seem to benefit from out of home placement. Both individuals spoke of the importance of the individual's readiness for change as the deciding factor for change, rather than any outside influence. There are various possible ways of viewing their opinions. They could be correct in their assumptions, in that maybe people who did change during out of home placement did so because of their own choices at the time, rather than any factors outside of themselves. Or it is possible that these two participants did not meet anyone who was helpful to them at the time, and they were in facilities that were not effective in promoting change. Also, neither was in any one placement for longer than three and a half months, therefore inspiring the question about long-term vs. short-term placements. Both of these participants were able to say that family members were consistently there for them in a caring capacity, and neither had any substantiated child protection reports in their files. Which brings forth another question, do children who are abused or neglected, and possibly more in need, benefit more from out of home placement than those who have other types of problems?

It is noteworthy that the participant who reported feeling unsafe in placements also had a history of perpetrating violence while in placement. Another participant spoke of her "attitude" while in placement as a survival mechanism. This is another area worth further exploration. Is it possible that many of the children in placement who act aggressively are really demonstrating their fear of the positions they are finding themselves in?

As stated above, the negative comments in regards to the helpfulness of social workers outweighed the positive comments. This finding should be regarded cautiously, as many may remember their complaints more than behaviors that they found helpful at the time. Also, participants elaborated on their negative comments further than their positive comments, thus producing more powerful statements. The most common complaints were a lack of ability to give input, lack of communication, and lack of follow-through with promises. However, given the vulnerability of those who do not have a caring and consistent adult in their lives, a social worker can have a strong and positive impact. For children or adolescents who have little contact with their biological family, and have been bounced around many placements, a social worker can be the common thread in their lives. Another potential powerful role a social worker could play for these children is helping them find adults who can be mentors to these children, in a non-professional role. This could help ensure that they have adults they can continue to turn to if a social worker leaves or they graduate from high school, but continue to need guidance.

The answers to the question about where they believe they would be had out of home placement not been available were remarkably powerful. One advantage to using interviews is that even a few powerful statements can be more valuable than large amounts of quantitative data to predetermined questions. Four out of the six participants predicted that their lives would be much worse if they had never been in out of home placement. Especially poignant were the statements that predicted either living in the streets or death. Of course one can never know if that would be true, but it makes a statement that out of home placement can have major and necessary impact on children who are in great need.

In regards to how they are doing now, five out of the six have set life or career goals, and have plans as to how they will accomplish those goals. The sixth (who is an adult) is also working, but not currently self-sufficient. Four are either currently attending college or have plans to. One is not decided, but is working in a job that is good experience for her field of interest. The sixth has no plans for further schooling. Because of the ages of most of the participants, little can be inferred about their independent living skills. Only three are over the age of eighteen, and therefore can not serve as a representative sample of this population. One point worth noting is that none were able to recall learning any independent living skills while in out of home placement. It may be beneficial for children in out of home placement to learn about independent living skills or how to plan for their future while under the age of eighteen. For example, one adolescent in foster care did not know that if he opened a savings account, rather than keeping his money in a safe at home, he could begin to earn interest.

Much of the advice provided speaks for itself. It should be reviewed with acknowledgement that it is not objective advice. The fact that it is subjective, and very personal, is both a strength and a weakness.

It is important to comment on the statement that one participant made that about 98% of all kids in placement have been abused in some way. Her use of percentage was made off-hand, however she does raise an interesting point. The Office of the Legislative Auditor, Program Evaluation Division for the State of MN report that 46.2% of children placed out of the home in the state of Minnesota in 1997 were placed due to parent misconduct. Placements due to child misconduct made up 30.3% of all placements (www.auditor.leg.state.mn.us/pe9902.htm). However, what is not known is whether or not the children who make up the child misconduct group have previously experienced abuse or neglect. It is known that children who have been abused are more likely to demonstrate assaultive and/or disruptive behaviors (Green, S.M., Russo, M.F., & Navratil, J.L., 1999; Herrenkohl, R.C., Egolf, B.P., & Herronkohl, E.C., 1997). It would be valuable to determine if children or adolescents who are being placed out of the home due to their own behaviors have a history of abuse and/or neglect. This may have beneficial implications when exploring preventative work with parents who are at risk for abuse and/or neglect or who are first time offenders.

Three participants commented on the importance of detecting abuse or neglect earlier. The individual who stated that "they need to speed up the process", believed that the

police who were frequently called to his mother's house should have intervened earlier. And the woman who lied to school officials believed that they should have been able to see the abuse for what it was. The woman quoted in the previous paragraph gave examples of times within her career in law enforcement when she believed someone should be intervening on the behalf of children, but social workers stated that there was nothing they could do. In a sense, they were commenting on a community change, rather than just a change within Human Services. Given that this is based on the advice of three people, it would be useful to collect more opinions of people in various positions about this issue.

The issue of respect is interwoven throughout the findings. It appears again in the advice section. One participant asked that people respect that his point of view, without assuming that they understand what he has been through. Another asks that kids be taught to handle their own problems.

Limitations

The size of the sample does impose some restrictions as to what can be inferred from the data. Groups cannot be compared for significant differences. It is unknown how different this small sample is from the rest of this population. It is possible that this group is unique in their opinions. The fact that they were able to be located makes them a unique group. They are younger, and have not moved far from where they were raised. They may also be more stable. There is the issue of self-selection. Why were these particular individuals willing to volunteer their time, and how are they different from those who were not willing? Were their experiences more positive than those who were unwilling?

This study only provides the point of view of the former or current child in question (with the exception of the phone conversation with one mother). Their opinions may be quite different than parents, social workers, and other professionals. Their opinions or answers could be in contrast to other people's point of view. This study is unable to address what those differences may be.

Many of the participants were asked to remember events from the past. Thus some details may not be accurate. However, that doesn't change the fact that their feelings are their feelings, and they are important to consider regardless.

Directions for Future Research

As many studies do, this research brings forth many questions. In the future, if Freeborn County Human Services would like to build upon this research, there are a few things to consider. One is that because Freeborn County is a small county, it may need to collaborate with other rural counties in order to develop a larger potential sample. The short amount of time provided for this study did not allow much time for locating participants. It may be worthwhile to put more time and effort into the search for potential participants, using databases that would be available through the state. For example, some research studies use DMV records to locate people. Freeborn County Human Services may also consider interviewing a younger population, who are currently in placement or just leaving placement.

If a larger sample was located, many other issues could be explored. Such as, are there differences between children who were in placement due to parent misconduct vs. child misconduct? And do the two groups overlap, and if so, how much? It could also be useful to compare the adults who are in prison to the rest of the population.

Another possible means of obtaining further data would be to collect data from multiple sources, such as parents and professionals. This would allow for a bigger picture into how out of home placement impacts many groups of people. It would also provide verification of opinions and facts.

Another topic worth further exploration is what social worker characteristics lead to greater satisfaction. It would be most advantageous to explore this with both former and current children in placement, as well as their parents, as the two groups may vary considerably in their opinions. It would be useful to ask specifically about the positive and helpful behaviors or actions of social workers, as this study didn't produce that information.

References

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